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Medieval Art History Today—Critical Terms

Guest Editor
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Inherent in the term “other” is the concept of binarism. The *Oxford English Dictionary* identifies late sixteenth-century usages establishing the word as an adjective or pronoun that distinguishes between two things (*OED*, s.v. “other,” I.A.1.a, I.B.2.a). A connected aspect of the word, evident from its earliest Old English forms in the twelfth century, is the notion of difference “in kind, nature, or quality” (I.A.6). In modern philosophical and psychoanalytic discourse, beginning in the nineteenth century, the term “other” (often preceded by “the” and with capitalization) gained use as a noun, typically set in opposition to the self (II.9.a). This new sense then won currency in popular usage, where the word could identify anyone outside of one’s group (II.9.b).

Some scholars of medieval society and culture have adapted the term as a means to refer to outsiders within or at the margins of the dominant society of the Latin West in the Middle Ages, a tendency within the field since the 1990s. So, for instance, a collection of translated documents chronicling medieval society’s disenfranchised—Jews, perceived sexual deviants, and heretics—announces itself as giving voice to the *Other Middle Ages*, while a collection of essays considering Avars, Bulgars, Khazars, and Cumans presents *The Other Europe of the Middle Ages*.¹ Scholars of medieval art history have embraced the term in landmark studies focusing specifically on Christian images of Jews and Judaism, and on Jewish-Christian contacts as manifest in art created in both communities—for example, Ruth Mellinkoff’s *Outcasts: Signs of Otherness in Northern European Art of the Late Middle Ages* and the collection of essays edited by Eva Frojmovic, *Imagining the Self, Imagining the Other*.² These studies and many further ones invoking the term “other” represent some of the boldest and most innovative scholarship in the fields of medieval studies and art history in recent generations. But I call into question the casual deployment of the word and its variants in analyses of medieval culture and society. The notion of the other has a rich genealogy within modern philosophical thought, and I worry that the easy use of the term suggests an essentializing timelessness to the confrontations either with enemy forces or between oppressed and oppressor to the detriment of analysis of specific historical conditions or the give-and-take of contesting parties. However, the term in its
gerund form—“othering”—has its uses. Othering can suggest the processes through which populations conceptualize one another and indicates a dynamic exchange, often lost in the noun form of the word. To probe more deeply into my concerns, in this brief essay I will review some of the key tenets of the theoretical discourse of the other and then offer a brief case study which suggests the benefits of historicized analysis and complicates adoption of a binary concept of self and other.

Perhaps the most influential formulations of the term “other” for modern thought are found in Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807), which posits that it is through the act of recognizing the other that the subject consolidates identity as a self-conscious being. A power struggle against exterior others as well as against the other within thus becomes central to the act of identity formation: “[The subject] must supersede this otherness of itself. . . . First, it must proceed to supersede the other independent being in order thereby to become certain of itself as the essential being; secondly, in so doing it proceeds to supersede its own self, for this other is itself.” The journey to self-consciousness is famously formulated in Hegel’s conceptualization of the dialectic between lord and bondsman (*Herrschaft* and *Knechtschaft*, also often translated as master and slave), where, in personal terms, each player could represent an interior state or, in social and historical terms, could represent actual individuals or peoples. The figures function in opposition to one another, though ultimately they depend upon one another and establish a system grounded in unequal status—the superiority of the lord and the subjugation of the bondsman. That is, their respective superior and subordinate statuses rely upon an interior state in which each individual player exists for the other, setting aside his own “being-for-self.” In Hegel, self and other are intimately integrated elements working together to constitute a self-conscious subjectivity.

Hegel’s readers concretize these abstract formulations, adapting and developing the concept of the other to explicate social conditions and to analyze the psyche. Karl Marx’s theory of class conflict embraces at its core the lord (capitalist)-bondsman (proletariat) struggle, anticipating a real-world revolution in which the lord is overthrown. Jacques Lacan developed the vocabulary to distinguish between an other (lowercase o) with which the individual subject engages in an interior struggle and the Other, which looms large and manifests a realm of fundamental alterity—what Lacan calls the symbolic order. This symbolic order, as explicated by Slavoj Žižek, “assumes concrete, recognizable shape in a name or in a mandate that the subject takes upon himself and/or that is bestowed upon him.” The subject then is acting for this looming ideal—for instance, God or the notion of the law—the “big Other,” from which the subject is in fact radically alienated, but upon which the subject at the same time is radically dependent.
Lacan’s investigation of the psyche had trenchant implications for the analysis of society, as has been recognized by postcolonial theorists. In broad terms, in the work of postcolonial thinkers, the other serves as a shorthand for the colonized, the exotic, and the alien, though there is no fixed discourse on the other (or Other) within such analyses. Rather, the term is deployed variously to elucidate particular historical and social circumstances of the modern world. For instance, Homi Bhabha’s analysis of stereotype in colonial discourse directly engages with the fantasy of the stereotyped other marked by dark skin—a figure desired and derided and against which the colonizer consolidates a “position of mastery.” Frantz Fanon recognizes the imperial convention to cast the native as other. But he inverts the terminology, engaging with a Hegelian notion—the inescapability of “being-for-others,” or what Lacan and Žižek would recognize as the big Other. Fanon considers the circumstance of the black person in the formerly colonized French West Indies who speaks in the alien French tongue as a means to renounce blackness: “to speak [French] is to exist absolutely for the other.” Gayatri Spivak adopts a verbal form, “othering”—consolidating a European self through alienating the colonized—a process which she discerns, for instance, in her investigation of the letters of agents of the British Empire serving in the Hill States of India in the early nineteenth century.

It is in this final formulation, “othering”, that I find the most potential for analysis of medieval conditions. For I hope that my brief review has made plain that the term “other” lacks a consistent significance within modern theoretical discourse. Philosophically speaking, the other can be an element that is subjugated. The other (or Other) can equally be a force that drives the behavior and sense of self among all communities—members of the dominant society as much as those deemed marginal. Othering, however, implies an unceasing operation in which the process of identifying and characterizing opponents is never complete, never fixed, leaving open the door for counteractions. There is much to consider about the ways in which high medieval Western Christians othered all types of alien populations—those they found threatening, especially Muslims or Eastern Christians, or those they considered to be alien within local society. I will limit my analysis to investigation of Jewish-Christian relations within northern Europe. Here Jews had reason to hold Christians in contempt, and adopted attitudes and developed polemics deriding the majority culture. A recent series of studies concerns itself directly with this interplay, considering the ways in which high medieval Jews could vehemently reject Christian notions of superiority—responses which in turn generated Christian reactions in an ongoing debate.

A work of art that suggests the dynamic of the Jewish-Christian encounter in some quarters in the high Middle Ages is the Cloisters Cross. This piece, carved from morse (walrus) ivory, measures roughly 22½ by 14¼ inches and is covered
with ninety-two diminutive figures and ninety-eight inscriptions. It probably dates to the second half of the twelfth century and long has been identified as English, though recent research indicates the possibility of a German or Franco-Flemish origin. The front of the cross is carved to resemble a tree whose branches are trimmed back, and toward the top, at the region that would have been above the now-lost corpus, Pilate and Caiaphas debate the significance of the titulus (Fig. 1). The surviving terminals on this side present post-Crucifixion scenes, and the central roundel depicts Moses and the brazen serpent, a typological antecedent to the Crucifixion in the Christian understanding. On the back are eighteen Old Testament prophets and prophetic figures (along with Matthew) identifiable by the text on the scroll each holds—texts understood by Christians to refer typologically, again, to Jesus’s crucifixion (Figs. 2 and 3).

Some elements of the work’s iconography allude to more or less amicable aspects of Jewish-Christian encounters in high medieval cities. For beginning in the eleventh century, Jewish populations, because of their storied mercantile acumen, were encouraged to move from centers in the Mediterranean and the Middle East to sites in the kingdoms of what are now England, France, and Germany as a means to jump-start urban economies. Within the cities of the north, Jews tended to live in distinct neighborhoods, but were by no means cut off from the larger Christian community, often establishing themselves at the spiritual and commercial centers of town. This translocation of a large population of the world’s Jews to northern Europe coincided with a quickening of intellectual inquiry on the part of Christians. The literal or historical level of scripture came to be of particular concern to clerics, and Christian exegetes apparently often turned to Jews for guidance in the meaning of the Hebrew Bible, or what Christians deem the Old Testament. These inquiries apparently led to actual debates, both formal and informal, on Jewish and Christian interpretations of Hebrew scripture—Christians, of course, understanding the texts as prophecies of Jesus’s life and execution, the establishment of the church, and the tenets of Christian dogma. On the Cloisters Cross the scrolls held by the prophetic figures on the back of the work evoke such debates. Here, for instance, Daniel bears a scroll with a snippet from his book reading “after seventy-two weeks Christ shall be slain” (Dan. 9:26). The Hebrew version of this passage, as opposed to the Vulgate, refers to “the anointed one” (not Christ) as the one prophesied to be “cut off,” and medieval Jewish exegetes objected to Christian co-option of this passage, contending, that the figure in question could be, for instance, the anointed Emperor Agrippa, and not Jesus. One can imagine actual rabbis and clerics voicing their opposing interpretations of the inscriptions wielded by the prophets on the cross.

Other aspects of the cross’s iconography evoke less cordial facets of Jewish-Christian encounters in high medieval cities. The roundel that adorns the intersection
Fig. 1. The Cloisters Cross, front. Walrus ivory, 22 5/8 x 14 1/4 in. (57.5 x 36.2 cm), 12th century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters Collection, 1963 (63.12). (Photo: © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.)
Fig. 2. The Cloisters Cross, back. Walrus ivory, 22 5/8 x 14 1/4 in. (57.5 x 36.2 cm), 12th century. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters Collection, 1963 (63.12). (Photo: © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.)
Fig. 3. The Cloisters Cross, back, detail of prophets. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters Collection, 1963 (63.12). (Photo: © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.)
of patibulum and crossarm on the back of the work features a prominent figure of the apocalyptic Lamb of God, who has been swiped by a spear held by the figure of Synagoga—a female personification of the Jewish tradition (Fig. 4). While Synagoga’s act itself may be taken as an expression of the Christian notion of Jewish hostility toward Jesus and Christianity in general, it is the text on Synagoga’s scroll that directly references Jewish animosity toward Christians as expressed in the streets of high medieval northern European cities. The text on her scroll is an abbreviation of the excerpt “Cursed is everyone that hangeth on a tree” (Fig. 5). This assertion is a paraphrase of Deuteronomy 21:23, and appears in Paul’s letter to the Galatians in the context of a passage celebrating Christian liberation from Judaic laws (Gal. 3:13). Some of the clerical viewers for whom the Cloisters...
Fig. 5. The Cloisters Cross, back, roundel, Synagoga. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, The Cloisters Collection, 1963 (63.12). (Photo: © The Metropolitan Museum of Art.)
Cross was made may well have understood the passage simply in terms of Christian supersession over Judaism, and abrogation of the “Old Law.” But many likely recognized reference in the passage to contemporary Jewish slurs against Christ. For it appears that at least as early as the late eleventh century in northern Europe, Jews would refer as a matter of course to Christ as “the hanged one.”

Given the fact that the milieu in which the Cloisters Cross was created and used is still up for debate, it is impossible to tether any of the textual evidence for this slur directly to the object. But instances of the moniker are so widespread across northern Europe that I feel safe in assuming that the cross’s maker knew of Jewish rebukes either directly or, more likely, through hearsay. A few Jewish texts help make the case. The Nizzahon Vetus, a thirteenth-century Franco-German work that reflects earlier traditions, asks, “How old was Mary when she gave birth to the hanged one?” A twelfth-century source from Troyes answers the question “Why did they hang ‘that man’?” by pointing to the foolish arrogance of Jesus who “came and said that he was God,” and thus was mocked by being raised up to heaven on a cross. In the widely circulating, parodic, and polemical Jewish text the Toledot Yeshu (History of Jesus), Jesus is beaten mercilessly and then executed by hanging—in some versions on an overgrown cabbage stalk. Moreover, in some manuscript versions of the Talmud, Jesus is presented as executed by stoning, and as hung on a tree, following prescriptions in the book of Deuteronomy. The tree form running down the front of the Cloisters Cross along with the textual snippet selected for Synagoga’s scroll made certain that medieval viewers could not forget Jewish ridicule of Jesus’s execution.

More direct scorn for Jewish mockery of Christ is found in the couplet inscribed in majuscule along the sides of the Cloisters Cross. This text reads, “Ham laughs when he sees the naked private parts of his parent. / The Jews laughed at the pain of God dying.” The verse refers to the episode in Genesis where Noah, having fallen asleep naked and drunk, is discovered by his youngest son, Ham. Ham does nothing to relieve the shame of his father, while his older brothers respectfully cover Noah up, averting their eyes to save their father from humiliation (Gen. 9:20–23). Noah punishes Ham with a curse on his descendants—figures who, in the Middle Ages, were understood to be the Jews. The image of Jews laughing at Christ on the cross finds its roots in the Gospel of Matthew, where a gang of Jews mocks the crucified Jesus. But moving from ancient Judea to the medieval street, Elliott Horowitz demonstrates that medieval Jews condemned the cross as an “abomination” (to’eva) or a “disgusting thing” (shikutz) and sometimes physically defiled it. A Jewish account of crusader attacks during the Second Crusade, for instance, reports that a maiden in Würzburg was taken “to their place of idolatry [a church] so as to profane her [baptize her]. [B]ut she sanctified the name [of God] and spat upon the abomination [the cross].” Going further, a chronicle of the First Crusade...
tells of two Jewish men of Trier who, ordered to bow before a crucifix, "thrust a rod at the abomination." Horowitz interprets this formulation as evidence that the Jews urinated on the cross or simply exposed themselves in vulgar hostility. And Horowitz's research suggests that this was by no means an isolated incident. Finally, the annual Purim ritual, which culminated in the hanging in effigy of Haman, was easily taken by Christians as a mocking of the crucifixion—and, indeed, Jews could confl ate Haman with Christ in the course of such revelry.

For their ridicule of Christ, the Jews are condemned to ruination by the Cloisters Cross. The prophets arrayed across the object wield their scrolls, insisting repeatedly that Hebrew scripture foretold Jesus as the executed messiah. The Jews who reject this message and curse the Lord through word and deed are themselves scorned and denounced in the Ham couplet along the cross's side. On the back medallion Synagoga wields a scroll invoking Jewish mockery of Christ as the hanged one, underscoring a rejection of the Christian message as she turns away from the Lamb of God. The final verdict against this figure is delivered in the inscription carved in capitals along the cross's front: "The earth trembles, Death defeated groans with the buried one rising. / Life has been called, Synagoga has collapsed with great foolish effort." In the logic of the Cloisters Cross, as Christ is raised up and executed, he triumphs over death; the deathly Synagogue, meanwhile, tumbles in ruin, a sign of the debased state of the superseded Jews.

I have imagined a scenario of Jews and Christians engaged in a dynamic of mutual mockery and derision as an explanation for some elements of the complicated iconography of the Cloisters Cross. Each community in this debate may have imagined their rivals in terms similar to those developed in modern theoretical explorations of the other. A Christian cleric engaged in intellectual debate with a Jew over the literal sense of scripture may have conceived of his rabbinic interlocutor as a Hegelian bondsman-like other, enslaved to a lordly Christian self. Indeed, Augustine conceptualized Jews as liegemen, preserving ancient scripture (the Old Testament) and ritual in the service of Christians. And Jews certainly recognized that there were ways to perform deference to the dominant Christian order in a manner paralleling Fanon’s colonized subjects adopting French. But a sense of the vivid interplay between the two parties, both confident in their positions—of Jews urinating on the cross, of Christians casting the Synagogue as a defunct and drooping woman—is lost in homogenizing language that casts society’s marginalized simply as "other." Theoretical conceptions of the other were developed in response to the historical circumstances of the modern era, and deployment of the word without recognition of that intellectual circumstance runs a risk of casting all nonnormative populations throughout history as undifferentiated, essentialized,
and passive victims, or simplistically demonized foes. Medievalists might, however, explore the utility of the verbal form “othering,” as deployed by Spivak in the examples of postcolonial theory mentioned previously. For this gerund captures the instability of categories of otherness, and invites investigation into the processes through which populations cast outsiders as others. If a blanket use of the word “other” runs the risk of grouping together all those outside the male, high-born, and Christian fold that has come to be taken for the medieval self, investigation of acts of othering may bring our analyses closer to the material, economic, and social conditions that drive power relations in any period.

NOTES

This essay features an analysis of the Cloisters Cross drawn from my book The Jew, the Cathedral, and the Medieval City: Synagoga and Ecclesia in the Thirteenth Century (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 65–74. I thank my art history colleagues at Fordham as well as Kristin Bergan and Glenn Hendler for consultation, proofreading, and encouragement on this essay.


7. On postcolonial theory and medieval art see Karen Overbey’s essay in this volume.


12. I thank Elizabeth Parker, Charles Little, and Peter Barnet for inspiring me to think about the Cloisters Cross in novel ways.


17. This is the case in a twelfth-century rabbinic text from Narbonne. See Joseph Kimhi, The Book of the Covenant, trans. Frank Talmage (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1972), 51.

18. Thus the lamb is presented as already slain, as suggested by the accompanying text (Rev. 5:5, 12), in distinction to the imagery on other processional crosses of the era. See Parker and Little, Cloisters Cross, 110–14.


20. See Parker and Little, Cloisters Cross, 111.


